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The manifest and the philosophical image of perceptual knowledge

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Abstract

Explanations of knowledge of mind-independent objects in terms of perception can be used to validate or vindicate claims to knowledge: they provide us with reasons for thinking that we know what objects are like. In this paper I contrast two ways to think about this ‘vindicatory role’ of perception. The majority view in epistemology is that it must be understood by reference to the way perception explains and warrants beliefs. I argue that this is not how perception figures in our ordinary explanatory and dialectical practice. As ordinarily conceived, perception’s role in vindicating a claim to knowledge that *p* turns on our ability to perceive that *p*. I suggest that this analysis enables us to adjudicate some entrenched disagreements over the sense, if any, in which perceptual knowledge is ‘based on’ sensory experience. I conclude with a suggestion about how to understand the conflict between the perspective of the commonsense psychology of perceptual knowledge and the perspective of the traditional philosophical project of explaining ‘perceptual warrant’.

Keywords

Epistemic perception, perceptual experience, reason-seeking questions, attention, perceptual recognition, epistemology.

We can distinguish two ways in which perception bears on our justification for claims about mind-independent objects around us. First, it is a familiar observation that the question ‘How do you know that *p*?’ can be used as a challenge (a ‘pointed question’, in Austin’s phrase). Used in this way, the question serves to probe the

addressee's entitlement to a claim to knowledge that *p*, often in response to her asserting or telling someone that *p*. In effect, the question asks for a reason to think that you do know that *p*. And it seems possible to meet that request — to vindicate your claim to knowledge — by relating your knowledge that *p* to your current or past perception. Call this the 'vindictory role' of perception. Second, we might ask about your justification or warrant for believing that *p*. 'Why do you believe that *p*?' is often used to press that question. And here too it is natural to think that a good answer can make reference, in various ways, to your current or past perception. Call this the 'warranting role' of perception.

My question in what follows is how the two sorts of justificatory role of perception are related to each other. The majority view in recent epistemology has been that 'perceptual warrant' comes first in the order of explanation. An account of *how you know* that the tile before you is blue (when you know this by sight), on this view, must put centre stage the explanation of your belief that the tile is blue. If your seeing what you see explains your knowledge this can only mean that it causes and warrants your belief, and that, in the light of this, your belief can be seen to amount to knowledge. Recently, however, a number of philosophers have challenged this 'belief-centred' analysis, and offered versions of an alternative view. On that view, the question of how we know what we know through perception is more basic than the question of what justifies or warrants perceptual beliefs, at least in cases of non-inferential perceptual knowledge. In such cases, we should approach the latter question in the light of our answer to the former. For example, the correct account of how you know the tile is blue may be that you can see (and thus know) that it's blue. That account makes no reference to any basis for your belief that it's blue. And we should be drawing on this explanation of your knowledge in understanding your entitlement, and perhaps your reason, for your belief.

There is no obvious single motivation from which the minority view springs. Three distinguished philosophers — Alan Millar, Barry Stroud and Timothy Williamson — have proposed versions of it in recent work, but it can look as if their adherence to it reflects quite different concerns. Williamson's interest seems to lie mainly in

applying his general account of the nature of evidence (as provided by knowledge) to the case of perceptually grounded knowledge, and perhaps in developing his view of propositional knowledge as a determinable of which propositional seeing is a determinate. In Stroud's work, the importance of propositional perception emerges in the context of reflection on how we can resist what Stroud describes as a 'restricted' conception of perception that he argues leads to philosophical scepticism. Millar characterizes his account of perceptual knowledge as 'commonsensical'. One inspiration is Austin's discussion of ordinary discourse about knowledge and perception (esp. in his 'Other minds'). These different concerns may not be mutually exclusive, of course, and in any case I think there is substantial agreement on a significant point, that the majority view (which accords explanatory priority to 'perceptual warrant') distorts the way perception figures in our ordinary explanatory/dialectical practice. We can put the idea as follows:

Epistemic Perception (EP): (a) 'I can see that the tile is blue' would ordinarily be regarded as a satisfactory account of how you know it's blue, yet (b) the account makes no reference to any evidence on the basis of which you believe the tile to be blue.

Let me clarify three terms. First, I speak of 'epistemic' perception since that, according to Millar, Stroud and Williamson, is what propositional perception amounts to: seeing that p entails knowing that p; it is a 'way of knowing' that p.¹ Second, I use the term 'evidence' in a somewhat loose and liberal sense here. There is no presumption, for example, that evidence is propositional or that beliefs based on evidence are inferential or even that evidence must be accessible to the subject. What matters is that evidence provides grounds for belief that may underwrite a belief's 'status as knowledge' and in that way explain how one knows what one knows. Third, the term 'ordinarily' raises important and delicate issues about the nature of what might be called the commonsense psychology of perceptual knowledge. Should we think of this as a 'folk theory'? To what extent does it exhibit

cultural variation? How can we discover (if that is what we have to do) its content and commitments? Without being able to address these questions adequately here, one thing I will assume is that some understanding of perception and its role in knowledge is essential for comprehending and negotiating the ‘space of reasons’. Without some such understanding one would not be able fully to participate in the practice of raising and answering ‘reason-seeking’ questions such as ‘Why do you believe this?’, ‘How do you know?’ or ‘Are you sure?’ — practices that are closely linked to other central human practices, such as testimony, joint attention, or shared reminiscing.

In addition to its more or less obvious epistemological significance, EP also has an important bearing on a basic question in the philosophy of mind. Consider John Campbell’s suggestion that ‘(o)rdinary common sense today still finds it compelling that there is a fundamental role for sensory experience in knowledge.’ (2014, p. 14) A ‘fundamental role’, I take it, would be a certain kind of explanatory role: it is *because* of the visual experience you enjoy of the tile there right in front of you that you are in position to know it’s blue, or so, according to Campbell, ordinary common sense still maintains. Why should common sense be assumed to take this view? Campbell does not elaborate, but many would argue the answer is obvious: we ordinarily think of sensory experience as what justifies perceptual beliefs about objects and in that way yields knowledge of what objects are like. If EP is correct, that interpretation must be rejected. There will be a real question as to whether the ‘fundamental role’ for sensory experience is a commitment of ordinary explanatory practice or perhaps merely a tenacious piece of revisionary epistemology. At this point, an interesting internal disagreement emerges between two ways of developing EP. On what I will call an austere reading of EP (encouraged by some of Stroud’s and Williamson’s writings on perceptual knowledge), perceptual explanations of knowledge terminate in attributions of epistemic perception. While seeing that *p* may somehow *involve* visual experience, there is no sense in which visual knowledge is *based on* such experience. A richer reading of EP (encouraged by Austin and Millar) would be more hospitable to Campbell’s suggestion. On it,

perceptual experience of objects plays an indispensable role in making epistemic perception itself intelligible.

My discussion falls into three parts. I start by saying more about the very idea of a 'vindicatory role' for perception. (Section 1) On a popular view, 'How do you know that p?' just is a request for the evidence on the basis of which you believe that p. I raise doubts about that view and propose an alternative account: briefly, the question is a request for a 'vindicatory explanation' of your knowing that p. In the second part (sections 2-4), I ask whether appeal to epistemic perception can provide the required 'vindicatory' sort of explanation (I suggest the answer is 'yes'), and whether it can do so without acknowledging a 'fundamental role for sensory experience' (I make a case for thinking that the answer is 'no'). In the last part (section 5) I consider where the correctness of EP would leave the traditional philosophical project of explaining our knowledge of the world around us in terms of perception's role in warranting beliefs.

1. Vindicatory explanations

There are two routes to the conclusion that 'How do you know that p?' (henceforth HK) must be a request for your evidence that p. One route argues that the question is asking for an explanation of your knowing that p, and that only the evidence on the basis of which you believe that p can deliver the required explanation. Advocates of EP, of course, reject that evidentialist assumption, so I set the first route to one side for the moment. The second route involves reflection on what is involved in using HK as a challenge or a 'pointed question'. It contends that the 'evidence-seeking' interpretation of HK is the only, or at least the best, way to understand the nature of the challenge.

An example of this second route is Daniel Stoljar's discussion of what he calls two 'versions' of HK, an 'evidence-seeking' and an 'explanation-seeking' version. He traces the distinction to Austin's discussion of two kinds of motivations for asking HK: as a 'pointed question' vs 'out of polite curiosity'. (Stoljar 2012, see Austin 1961) Stoljar does not spell out why asking HK 'pointedly' is supposed to be a matter of

using it as a request for evidence, but I take it the idea is this. To be used as a challenge, HK would need to bring into play some normative question, a question concerning your right or entitlement to hold some attitude. Now, in the case of ‘Why do you believe that p?’ (WB), it is obvious which normative question is in play: WB itself is naturally and routinely used to ask for your normative reason for believing that p. By doing so, it raises the possibility that you have no adequate reason; as Austin says, it ‘suggests that perhaps you oughtn’t to believe’ that p. (Austin 1961, p. 78) In the case of HK, things are more complicated. Knowledge is not a ‘judgement-sensitive attitude’.² It makes no sense to request your normative reason for knowing that p. Then how should we understand the dialectical significance of the question? What it must be asking for, it might be said, is once again your reason and entitlement to believe that p.³

The proposal cannot be quite right as it stands, though. HK is not the same question as WB. Its subject matter is your knowing, not just believing, that p. One might accommodate this by saying that the question asks for a normative reason for belief that meets a further condition: it should explain your knowing that p. At this point, however, we should ask whether conceiving of HK as a request for an *explanation* may not be enough to account for its ‘pointed’ character. Suppose our interest is in whether your claim to knowledge that p is acceptable — whether there is good reason to think you do know that p. Asking for an explanation of your knowing that p would be a natural way to press that question. Note, first, that quite generally requesting an explanation of the fact that q can be a way to seek reassurance that it

2 See Scanlon 1998 for the notion of a judgement-sensitive attitude. Austin notes that ‘(w)e seem never to ask “*Why* do you know?”’ (Austin 1961, p. 78) This may reflect our habit of hearing a second-person why-question relating to a propositional attitude as a reason-seeking question: a question for which knowledge is not an intelligible target.

3 Marie McGinn relies on this view in defending her unorthodox view that in the case of direct observational judgements HK is off-key (more precisely: inappropriate as a matter of principle, rather than just, usually, conversationally odd, perhaps because of the obviousness of the answer). She writes that ‘it is [in such cases], for example, very unclear what I might offer as evidence for the things I assert.’ (2011, p. 2) One might agree with this, but question whether evidence is what HK must be asking for.

is true that *q*. There is a sense, of course, in which the request presupposes that *q*; there would be nothing to explain unless *q* were true. But that does not mean that the question makes no sense unless the questioner is convinced that *q*. ‘Why would she do such a thing?’ can ask for an explanation of an action that would simultaneously help to convince a sceptic that the act in question happened. Similarly, in requesting an explanation of your knowing something, we may, as Williamson puts it, ‘politely grant’ that you do know, ‘and merely ask how, perhaps suspecting that there is no answer to the question.’ (2000, p. 253) The suggestion might be put by saying that HK demands a ‘vindictory explanation’ of your knowing that *p*: an explanation that would show that your attitude to *p* is indeed knowledge, not (say) mere belief or conjecture.⁴ This, I think, is exactly in line with Austin’s observation that HK, when used ‘pointedly’, ‘suggests that perhaps you *don’t* know it at all’. (1961, p. 78) A good answer is expected to dispel that suggestion.

There may be a case for imposing restrictions on the sorts of explanations that would properly engage with HK, but this provides no support for the ‘evidence-seeking’ interpretation. One such restriction seems to be implicit in the phrase ‘vindictory explanation’. Consider the explanatory role of interests. Your knowing the date of the battle of Montaperti may be explained by your passion for medieval history. It’s because of your interest that you came to know this. That may be a perfectly satisfactory (partial) explanation, but it does not by itself give us much of a reason to think that what you have is knowledge. Conspiracy theories equally reflect the subject’s keen interests. It is not implausible to think that it’s because of this that appeal to interests would not be a fully satisfactory answer to HK. What the question is seeking is an explanation of your knowing that *p* in terms of factors that make it

4 See Stroud’s discussion of the sense in which a successful account of how we know what we know should be ‘legitimizing’, insofar as it should enable us ‘to understand that what we have got *is* knowledge of, or reasonable belief in, the world’s being a certain way.’ (Stroud 2000, p. 152) I borrow the term ‘vindictory explanation’ from David Wiggins’s use of the term in connection with explanations that account for someone’s believing something in a way that implies the truth of their belief. (Wiggins 1996)

clear that your attitude to *p* is knowledge.⁵ A further restriction we might consider is that HK asks for an explanation in terms of a means or method for finding out whether *p*. Compare Ayer's suggestion that '(n)ormally we do not say that people know things unless they have followed one of the accredited routes to knowledge.' (1956, p. 33) Even if these restrictions can be corroborated, though, they lend no immediate support to the 'evidence-seeking' interpretation. You might argue that only evidence delivers vindictory explanations of knowledge, or that only evidence amounts to an 'accredited route to knowledge'. But that would be to adopt the first route to the 'evidence-seeking' interpretation I mentioned at the beginning. It would be to argue that only evidence can provide the thing HK is requesting, viz. a certain kind of explanation of your knowing that *p*.

The upshot is that HK is a 'reason-seeking' question in its own right (a request for a reason to think you know that *p*), not just a proxy for the reason-seeking question 'Why do you believe that *p*?' In the light of this, consider Sellars's well-known claim that knowledge is a position in the 'logical space of reasons, of justifying and being able to justify what one says' (Sellars 1956, pp. 298-9). The passage is usually interpreted as expressing a commitment to epistemological internalism. If you know that *p* you should normally be able to cite what might be called a 'knowledge-providing' reason, viz. a reason for believing that *p* that would help to underwrite the status of your belief as knowledge and would in that way explain how you know that *p*. (See e.g. McDowell 2011 for that reading.) This may well be the intended reading, but it is significant that Sellars's formulation — 'justifying what one says' — is open to a perfectly natural alternative construal. If you tell us that *p*, and we pointedly ask 'How do you know?', a good answer to our question would corroborate the claim to knowledge that's implicit in your act of telling and would thus 'justify what you say'. The passage from Sellars, in other words, may be read as

⁵ If this is right, we would need to revisit the question whether there is after all a distinction to be drawn between two 'versions' of HK: a 'dialectical' version (requesting a vindictory explanation) and a 'merely biographical' version (asking for any kind of explanation, perhaps equivalent to 'How come you know that *p*?' or 'What explains your knowing that *p*?'). I am inclined to think the answer is 'no' (HK quite generally expects a vindictory explanation, even when the audience needs no convincing that you know that *p*) but I won't pursue the matter here.

suggesting that possession of propositional knowledge requires the ability to offer vindicatory explanations of one's knowledge. One reason the difference matters is that on this latter reading, there is nothing in the slogan advocates of EP need to object to. What they will question is whether it takes a 'knowledge-providing' reason (or any sort of warrant-conferring basis for belief) to validate a claim to knowledge.

2. Epistemic perception

It will be useful to have three responses to EP before us. First, here, again, is EP itself:

Epistemic Perception (EP): (a) 'I can see that the tile is blue' would ordinarily be regarded as a satisfactory account of how you know it's blue, yet (b) the account makes no reference to any evidence on the basis of which you believe the tile to be blue.

And here are the three responses, from an 'evidentialist' opponent and from advocates of the austere vs the richer reading of EP, respectively:

- (1) EP cannot be right: without some grasp of the epistemic basis in virtue of which perceptual beliefs qualify as knowledge we could have no reason to think that what we get from perception is knowledge. While (a) may be correct, (b)'s gloss on (a) must be rejected. One way to do so would be to insist that 'I can see that the tile is blue' is the self-ascription of a 'belief-independent' perceptual state that may be one's reason for believing that the tile is blue, such that one knows it's blue because one believes it's blue for that reason. (McDowell 2011) Another option would be to think of propositional perception as a sort of promissory note. To say that you can see the tile to be blue is to say that a more detailed perceptual explanation of your knowledge, in terms of some sort of perceptual evidence, is in the offing.
- (2) EP is correct: we find our possession of knowledge about the world around us intelligible in terms of 'ways of knowing' provided by propositional

perception in various modalities. Such explanations have (to borrow a term from Cassam 2007) a distinctive 'finality'. There is nothing to add to the statement that you know the tile to be blue because you can see that it's blue, except perhaps the negative point that you can see this without inference. (Occasionally we say that someone is able to see that *p* when she more or less automatically infers that *p* from visually manifest evidence, as when the milk bottles piling up in your neighbour's porch enable you to see that she is away, or the presence of her car that she is not. In such cases, of course, the subject's possession of knowledge is to be explained in terms of the evidence that constitutes her reason for the relevant belief.)

- (3) EP is correct so far as it goes, but it leaves out an important dimension of our ordinary understanding of perceptual knowledge. That you can see the tile to be blue is not something we would ordinarily regard as the last word on how you know that it is blue. There are two kinds of factors that render epistemic perception itself intelligible: (i) our perceptual experience of objects and (ii) our exercising certain standing abilities, e.g. the ability to tell whether something is a tile, or whether it's blue, when you see it, under favourable conditions. There is a sense, then, in which epistemic perception *is* a sort of promissory note. The important thing is that it does not take a 'belief-centred' explanation to redeem the promise. We make sense of our ability non-inferentially to perceive what the world is like in terms of the exercise of certain perceptual-epistemic capacities, to tell the features of things or to recognize or identify things as falling under certain kinds or as certain individuals.

It is worth stressing that the disagreement here is not about the shape of a satisfactory philosophical theory of perceptual knowledge. It's about the correct analysis of ordinary explanatory practice, and about the nature of the reasons we ordinarily take ourselves to have for thinking that we know what perceived objects are like. It is not clear, therefore, that advocates of the explanatory priority of 'perceptual warrant' at the level of epistemological theorizing are committed to (1). Perhaps they have no interest in understanding our ordinary reasons for claims to

perceptual knowledge, or perhaps they may even accept some version of EP, with the proviso that ultimately our entitlement to claims to perceptual knowledge can only be understood (and corroborated) by a philosophical theory of perceptual warrant. I will return to this idea in section 5. My immediate question is how we should understand the disagreement between (2) and (3).

I suggested that there are traces of (2) in some of Stroud's and Williamson's recent writings on perceptual knowledge. The textual evidence is not entirely clear-cut, but there are passages that encourage the suggestion that perceptual explanations of knowledge simply identify a *way in which we know* what we know, without adverting to any explanatory factors external to our knowledge. A significant part of the motivation for this, I think, has to do with what Stroud and Williamson see as the disastrous consequences of giving conscious perceptual experience any kind of 'external' explanatory or vindicatory role. Consider Stroud's discussion of what he calls 'objectual perception'. He argues that your perceiving an object is not sufficient for explaining how you know what the object is like: '(y)ou can perceive an object without knowing anything about it; without even having any beliefs about it.' That seems right, but it would be consistent with a view on which 'objectual perception' nevertheless plays an indispensable explanatory role, in tandem with other factors. This does not seem to be Stroud's view, however.⁶ He moves directly from the insufficiency of 'objectual perception' to the conclusion that '(t)he kind of perception [that] is needed to account for knowledge of the world is therefore what might be called propositional perception.' (Stroud 2009, p. 565) That conclusion, I think, reflects Stroud's resistance to giving perceptual experience of objects (and thus 'objectual perception') what Campbell calls a 'fundamental role' in making perceptual knowledge intelligible. Elsewhere Stroud puts this as follows:

6 'Seeing that the cat is on the mat typically involves seeing that cat and seeing the mat. But when I see only that it is foggy everywhere, for instance I see and thereby know that that is how things are, but it could be that I do not see any objects at all.' (2011a, 93) There are also passages, however, that point in the direction of (3). Consider Stroud's remark that 'the kind of perceptual knowledge I want to draw attention to requires a capacity to recognize, in the right circumstances, that an item now within your awareness falls, or does not fall, under a concept you are master of and understand.' (2011a, p. 95)

‘I think a person can sometimes *see*, for example, that there is a red tomato on a white plate right before him, and in that way he *knows* it is so. It is not that he knows it *on the basis of* some experience he is having. No experience serves as his *ground* or *reason* for claiming or judging as he does.’ (Stroud 2013, p. 4)

There are some indications that Williamson shares this view:

‘what the speaker is reporting [when she explains how she knows that p by saying ‘I can see that p’] is not an experience somehow prior to knowledge, but simply a particular kind of knowledge: visual knowledge.’ (Williamson 2009, p. 348)

Admittedly, Williamson observes that ‘if required, a much fuller account could be given of *how one sees* that there is a red cube before one’ (2009, p. 359, my emphasis). Again, Stroud notes that epistemic perception ‘typically *involve(s)* perceiving one or more objects.’ (Stroud 2009, p. 565, my emphasis; but see footnote 7 above.) Both seem happy to acknowledge that there is more to our ordinary thinking about perception than can be captured by listing concepts of epistemic perception in the various modalities or by saying that perceiving is a way of knowing. What they appear to deny is that any of this further material is of much interest when it comes to understanding how you know that the tile is blue, or understanding our reasons for thinking that your attitude is knowledge. To avoid the blind alleys of classical foundationalism we need to discard the whole idea that our knowledge can be made intelligible by reference to sensory experience ‘somehow prior to knowledge’.

The trouble is that this picture makes it hard to understand the ‘vindicatory’ character or function of perceptual explanations of knowledge. Consider first a general challenge to EP that advocates of (1) will wish to press. What makes perceptual explanations of knowledge ‘vindicatory’? According to (1), there is a

ready-made general model for understanding our reason for thinking that you know the tile is blue. The model also applies, for example, to our reason for thinking that the attitude you acquire by competent deductive inference from known premises is knowledge. In both cases, the attribution of knowledge is compelling in the light of our understanding of your grounds for belief. Call this a 'generalist' approach to the vindicatory role of perception. While 'internalist' and 'externalist' theories of warrant offer competing articulations of the general model, they are agreed that some such model is needed to make sense of our reasons for crediting ourselves and others with perceptual knowledge. It must be possible, in other words, to state and understand our reasons by the use of general epistemic concepts, for example by saying that perception provides us with 'justifying reasons for belief' or constitutes a 'reliable belief-forming process'.

The challenge facing EP is to formulate a 'particularist' alternative. (3) promises to meet that challenge by reference to 'specialized' perceptual-epistemic abilities. Our reason for thinking that your attitude is knowledge turns on our conception of the ability you exercise in acquiring the attitude, as an ability visually to recognize — that is, come to *know* — whether something is a tile. Whether such abilities can carry the explanatory weight (3) places on them is a good question, to which I will turn in a moment. (2), on the other hand, would suggest that 'She can see (or otherwise perceive) that p' is all the reassurance we can offer in response to 'How does she know that p?' (when she knows that p through perception). You might say that conversational patterns bear this out. As Paul Snowdon observes, 'we treat it as totally unproblematic that someone's knowledge that p can be explained by saying they saw that p.' (Snowdon 1998) But note that Snowdon presumably means 'by *truly* saying (i.e. by invoking the fact that) they saw that p'. Arguably, the claim that they did see that p is not something we generally treat as totally unproblematic. There are familiar ways to probe claims to epistemic perception, such as 'How can you tell?' or 'Are you sure?' — unsurprisingly, given that there are familiar ways in which claims to epistemic perception can be mistaken. It seems, then, that commonsense psychology is not indifferent to the enabling conditions of epistemic

perception, and that its concern with these conditions is linked to the practice of questioning and corroborating claims to knowledge.

Defenders of (2) might consider another way to understand the ‘vindictory’ role of perception. To see that *p*, as Williamson says, is to know that *p* ‘by sight’. (2009, p. 348) This suggests that ‘I can see that *p*’ after all invokes an explanatory factor external to your knowing that *p*, and that our reason for thinking you do know that *p* turns on that factor. Roughly: it is because you acquired your attitude by sight that it can be seen to be knowledge. On this analysis, ‘I saw that *p*’ seems akin to ‘by inference’ or ‘someone told me’. In all three cases, we make good our claim to knowledge by reference to the kind of source from which the knowledge flows. In many contexts, this would be seen as a perfectly adequate reply to HK, and your inability to recall any particulars would not surprise anyone. On the other hand, we would ordinarily take it for granted, in all three cases, that a more informative or fine-grained explanation could be given, or would have been available to you at the time you acquired your knowledge. Moreover, there are circumstances in which only a more detailed account could successfully corroborate your claim to knowledge. If we think there is good reason to doubt that *p*, it may not be sensible to accept your claim to knowledge that *p* without considering who told you that *p*, or which argument led you to conclude that *p*, or how you are supposed to have been able to see that *p*.⁷

7 Uncompromising defenders of (2) might at this point be tempted to reject the assumption that HK is a request for a vindictory explanation of your knowing that *p*. Inspired by elements of Williamson’s account of knowledge as the most general factive mental state, they might suggest that HK asks for the specific *way* in which you know (which need not be a way of ‘coming to know’), and that the dialectical force of HK is to be understood in terms of the fact that ways of knowing that *p* are determinates of the determinable knowing that *p*. The idea would be that by identifying the way in which one knows that *p* one vindicates one’s claim to knowledge that *p* in much the same way as the observation that an object is blue serves to corroborate the claim that it is coloured. (Williamson’s remark that ‘How do you know?’ ‘presupposes that *somehow* you do know’ (2000, p. 152, my emphasis) might be read in this way.) I see two sorts of problems with this suggestion. First, there are problems with the notion of ways of knowing. For example, since ‘I regret that *p*’ is not a good answer to HK, not any kind of factive mental state would seem to qualify as a ‘way of knowing’, in the technical sense, and it is not obvious how that sense is to be regimented. (See Cassam 2009). Williamson counts ‘remembering that

In summary, an austere version of EP, along the lines of (2), does not seem to get to the bottom of the reasons we ordinarily have (or think we have) for crediting ourselves and others with perceptual knowledge. I now consider the prospects for a richer version of EP, along the lines of (3). In section 4, I return to the question whether perceptual knowledge depends on sensory experience ‘somehow prior to knowledge’.

3. Perceptual recognition

Consider Austin’s list of statements that would ordinarily be regarded as good answers to the question ‘How do you know there is a bittern at the end of the garden?’:

- (a) I was brought up in the fens.
- (b) I heard it.
- (c) The keeper reported it.
- (d) By its booming.
- (e) From the booming noise.
- (f) Because it is booming.

Setting aside (c), these statements seem to presuppose that your knowledge can be explained in terms of an acquired skill (see a) of telling whether something is a bittern by its call (see d-f), the exercise of which requires the perceptual presence of

p’ as a way of knowing that p, but this is surely not straightforward. ‘I remember that p’ hardly provides a fully adequate answer to HK. (On my interpretation of HK this is unsurprising: that you were able to retain your knowledge sheds no light on how you were able to acquire it.) Second, the interpretation of HK as a request for a ‘way of knowing’, in the stipulated sense of a determinate of the determinable ‘knowledge’, looks less promising when we look at languages other than English. Questions that perform the dialectical role HK plays in English include ‘*Whence* do you know that p?’ (Woher weißt du das? Nereden biliyorsun?) and ‘*How do you manage* to know that p?’ (Come fai a saperlo?) These questions seem straightforwardly to request a (certain kind of) *explanation* of your knowing that p.

the object (see b). Now, if reflection on examples like this is to help elaborate and defend (3), it needs to show that two conditions can be met (and reconciled):

- (i) Knowledge gained by perceptual recognition is not (always) inferential.
 Telling that something is F 'from' (or 'by') some mark or characteristic set of features may occasionally be a matter of first acquiring perceptual knowledge that the thing shows the relevant mark or features, and then inferring that it is F, hence coming to believe it is F for the reason that it has the relevant mark. But this is not how perceptual recognition works in basic, paradigmatic cases. Note that what is being exercised, in the inferential case, is not a 'dedicated' perceptual-recognitional capacity but simply the 'general purpose' capacity to be appropriately responsive to one's epistemic reasons. Admittedly, it may not be straightforward, in any given case, to say whether the resulting knowledge depends on inference. In the case of the bittern, for example, the matter is complicated by the question whether, as Austin seems to suggest, you can hear *the bittern* itself, or merely the booming noise it makes. I'll skirt this issue by reverting to visual examples. What matters is that in basic cases, appeal to perceptual recognition explains how we are able to perceive what an object is like without invoking our belief and its epistemic basis.
- (ii) Your capacity visually to tell whether something is a tile, or blue, is not a mere disposition or 'power' to acquire knowledge of whether it's a tile, or blue; it is the reason why you have that disposition. The problem with a dispositional interpretation is that the explanatory value of capacities for perceptual recognition would be extremely limited. As Alan Millar puts it, appeal to such capacities would look like 'explaining why people fall asleep in terms of their having taken a drug with the power to make someone fall asleep.' It would amount to invoking 'some power or other — *we know not what* — to acquire such knowledge'. (Millar 2008, p. 336) Invocations of occult powers of knowledge-acquisition, of course, would hardly provide a fully satisfactory way to corroborate claims to knowledge. On a dispositional analysis, perceptual-recognitional capacities would really just be another sort

of promissory note, to be redeemed, presumably, by some kind of underlying belief-centred explanation. (Perhaps a reliabilist analysis of perceptual telling à la Goldman (1976).)

Millar's response to the 'virtus dormitiva' objection is that a perceptual-recognitional capacity, as ordinarily conceived, is not a disposition but an ability 'that has a certain structure'. Visually identifying a finch, for example, involves being 'responsive to the shape of the bird, its size, how it moves, and so on' (2008, p. 336) — to features that constitute the distinctive visual appearance of a finch.⁸ The challenge is to explain what this 'responsiveness' comes to, if it is not a matter of inference. There is also another question: what sort of 'structure', if any, is supposed to be present in cases where there seems to be nothing 'from which' we tell what an object is like (for example, in the case of recognizing an object's shape or colour)? Progress with these questions can be made, I want to suggest, by comparing and contrasting perceptual recognition, as ordinarily conceived, with examples of what might be called 'implicit' or 'opaque' perceptual telling. I want to highlight three kinds of differences, corresponding to three elements of the (non-inferential) 'structure' that makes ordinary perceptual-recognitional capacities richly explanatory.

Perceptual attention. Compare a perceptual judgement — 'that tile is blue' — with a 'blindseer's' statement 'it's blue', said in response to the experimenter's request to guess whether an object placed in the patient's blind field is blue. A salient feature of the latter case is that while a blindseer is able reliably to guess what an object in her blind field is like, her ability strikes us, and her, as completely mysterious. Vision science tells us that the ability is underpinned by 'implicitly processed' visual information, but neither the subject herself nor commonsense psychology in general have any insight into the basis of her guesswork, not even into whether vision has anything to do with it. We experience no such puzzlement in the case of your judgment 'that tile is blue'. Unlike the blindseer you can see the thing you are talking about, and doing so enables you visually to attend to it. According to one tradition

⁸ Or perhaps a determinate of the determinable 'the distinctive visual appearance of a finch.' See Price 1953, esp. p. 54, for discussion.

in philosophical writings on attention, attending to a perceptually presented object provides a means for answering questions about the object.⁹ I think this captures precisely the difference we would ordinarily see between sight and blindsight. It's partly in the light of that 'means' that we find your judgement about the tile (and the knowledge it expresses) intelligible. Perceptual attention to an experienced object is not a 'means' blindseers have at their disposal.¹⁰ That, plausibly, is why their ability delivers, at least most immediately, mere guesswork, not perceptual knowledge.

Sensory appearances. It's a time-honoured theme in the literature on perceptual recognition that it can be hard to articulate the appearances to which a perceptual judgement is responsive. Consider Leibniz's illustration of what he calls 'confused perception': 'we see that painters and other skilled craftsmen can accurately tell well-done work from what is poorly done, though often they can't explain their judgments, and when asked about them all they can say is that the works that displease them lack a certain *je-ne-sais-quoi*.'¹¹ And it is not just 'expert perception' that can seem intangible in this way. As Alan Millar observes, 'there is no a priori reason to suppose that facility at recognizing people goes with facility at registering the person's features at the level of judgement'. What's more, even if we were able to identify the relevant visible features, this would 'fall short of articulating that to which we respond' when recognizing Bill by sight, viz. the 'Gestalt of a face, or a distinctive gait.' (2010, p. 122).

9 Cedric Evans defines 'interrogative attention' as the 'the attention we pay to an object in order to enlarge our knowledge.' (1970, p. 100) Naomi Eilan suggests that perceptual attention is 'among other things, the means by which we answer (...) questions about the environment.' (1998, p. 194) According to John Campbell, 'conscious attention to an object (...) affects the functional role of your experience of the object. Having once consciously focused on the object, you are now in a position to keep track of it deliberately, to answer questions about it, and to act on it.' (2002, pp. 10-11)

10 To be precise, they are unable to engage in the activity of perceptually attending to experienced objects. That point is not inconsistent with evidence that the processing underlying blindseers' conjectures may implicate attentional mechanisms. (Kentridge et al. 2004)

11 Leibniz 1989, p. 291. I've used Jonathan Bennett's translation, available here: <http://www.earlymoderntexts.com/search?q=leibniz+knowledge>

In the light of this, the idea that perceptual-recognitional capacities provide for intelligible knowledge may begin to look dubious. Elusive appearances, you might say, can hardly be expected to render the ability to identify kinds and properties comprehensible. But on reflection that would be too quick. Consider a second case of ‘implicit telling’, viz. professional chicken-sexing, as described in the philosophical literature. The subject looks at the chick (unlike a blindseer she can actually see the relevant object) and finds herself guessing ‘female’. While it’s plausible for her to associate her (as it turns out, reliable) guesses with seeing the chick, she has no idea what makes her think ‘female’ rather than ‘male’. Note that the cases described by Leibniz and Millar are not like *that*. The subjects are struggling to articulate the visual appearances that prompt their judgements, but neither of them seems to be in any doubt that there *is* a certain way the object looks to which they are responsive. The sense in which they ‘can’t explain their judgements’ is quite different from the utter darkness in which blindseers and even ‘chicken-sexers’ find themselves when reflecting on the origins of their thoughts. Furthermore, we should not overstate the point that we may not be able to ‘register’ recognition-enabling features ‘at the level of judgement’. It is one thing to point out, as is frequently and plausibly done in the literature on perceptual recognition, that we are not in general good at *describing* the features by which we can tell kinds of things. (Austin 1961 [first published 1946], Price 1953, Urmson 1956) It is another to say, less plausibly, that we have no idea of what they are. For one thing, so long as we are in the presence of the object, we may be able to indicate the relevant appearance by the use of perceptual demonstratives (‘that colour’). Sometimes we may only be able to gesture towards a higher-level property or Gestalt (‘something about his gait’). Sometimes we may have to resort to identifying appearances comparatively (‘he looks like Bill’).¹² The point that matters is that recognition-enabling features don’t have the status of a ‘theoretical posit’, something the existence of which we hypothesize though we have no real idea of its nature. There is a sense in which we take ourselves to be presented with such features, and we seem to be sufficiently articulate about their character to invoke

12 Compare Millar’s reference to the ‘gesturing character’ of explanations of how we can perceptually tell things. (2010, p. 123)

them in making our perceptual judgements (in particular, the predicates we apply to an experienced object) intelligible.¹³

Standing knowledge. The etymology of ‘recognition’ suggests that prior cognition of a finch is required to count as re-cognizing something as a finch. It might be said that what this involves is simply the standing capacity to discover whether a perceived object is a finch from the features making up its sensory appearance. Arguably, though, we make sense of that capacity in terms of possession of a certain kind of standing *knowledge*. To bring this out, here is my final example of a case of ‘implicit telling’ (though the label is debatable). In ‘Imagination and Perception’, Strawson contrasts the following cases:

‘Compare seeing a face you *think* you know, but cannot associate with any previous encounter with seeing a face you *know* you know and can very well so associate, even though there does not, as you see it, occur any particular *episode* of recalling any particular previous encounter. The comparison will show why I say that the past perceptions are, in the latter case, not merely causally operative, but alive in the present perception.’ (1974, p. 59)

13 One complication arises from the fact that we often exercise, or try to exercise, perceptual-recognitional capacities in less than ideal circumstances. For example, when your attention is attracted by something at the periphery of your visual field for a split second and you find yourself thinking (correctly) it was a sparrow, you may not be able even to gesture at any visual appearance that gave rise to your judgement. In some such cases, the right thing to say may be that you were not in fact able to exercise your capacity for recognizing sparrows but, as a result of *trying* to do so, found yourself guessing it was a sparrow. (See Millar 2010 for an illuminating exposition and defence of the view that ‘exercising a perceptual-recognitional capacity is a success notion’: we may unsuccessfully attempt to exercise the capacity to recognize whether something is a sparrow, but when we do exercise it what we gain is knowledge.) Perhaps at least some cases of ‘implicit telling’ involve such attempts at recognition under extreme conditions (for example, conditions of extreme speed). Biederman and Shiffrar’s investigation of (real) chicken sexing seems to be in keeping with that interpretation. The subjects they interviewed routinely sex 1000 chicks per hour, ‘spending less than a half second viewing the cloacal region’ where males and females display slightly different ‘eminences.’ (In males the eminences are ‘convex’, in females ‘flat or concave.’) (1987, pp. 640-1).

The first case might be described by saying that someone's face strikes you as familiar or even that you 'recognize' the face, in the feeble sense that you find yourself thinking 'I've met this person', and do so as a result of some previous encounter. In the second case, you come to know 'that's Bill', by exercising something you apparently lack in the first case: a recognitional capacity for Bill. But that is not all. In the second, but not in the first case, it is natural to say that you know how Bill looks, and that this knowledge is reflected — 'alive' in some sense — in your judging and seeing that it is Bill. It is partly in the light of that standing knowledge that we find your ability to recognize Bill intelligible. The same point applies to the perceptual recognition of kinds or basic features. It's because you *know* what tiles, and blue things, look like under standard conditions that it's unsurprising that you can tell 'this tile is blue' when you see it in good daylight right in front of you.

It might be said that all of these points are compatible with an inferentialist model, on which thoughts about appearances matter because they provide us with premises from which to draw conclusions about reality. The idea would be that what your standing knowledge of how blue things looks provides for, most immediately, is just the recognition that the tile looks blue, from which, absent conflicting evidence, you may infer that it is blue. One problem with this model is that it distorts the role thoughts about appearances ordinarily play in perceptual knowledge. Such thoughts enable us to make our knowledge intelligible, but it does not seem right to suggest that to find out what objects are like through perception we *first* have to form a view of their sensory appearances. The model also raises familiar epistemological concerns. How, if perception never enables us to know reality directly, are we supposed to know that appearances provide good evidence of the nature of reality? Perhaps the most telling line of objection to the inferential model is that the capacity to recognize appearances *presupposes* the capacity (directly) to recognize the corresponding reality. In any given case, of course, you may reflect that something looks blue while reserving judgment on whether it is blue. But would you be able to do so without ever being able to tell directly that an object is blue? Intuitively, your reflection is a matter of registering what you would take the thing's colour to be (by

visually recognizing it) if you had no reason to suspect appearances to be misleading. As Strawson put it, you ‘use’ the perceptual claim you would ordinarily have made without endorsing it. (Strawson 1988) This analysis is in keeping with a natural suggestion about the way perceptual-recognitional capacities are acquired. We are not *first* taught how to tell the look of tiles or of the colour blue. Rather, we learn visually to tell blue things or tiles, in doing which we also learn to recognize the distinctive visual appearance that makes such perceptual identifications possible. The capacity to think about these appearances would not be available independently of the capacity for non-inferential perceptual recognition.¹⁴

Earlier I suggested that EP demands a ‘particularist’ account of the way perception vindicates claims to knowledge, an account of the ‘reassurance’ provided by perceptual explanations of knowledge that is not couched in general epistemic terms. The obvious suggestion, from the point of view of (3), is that our reason for accepting that you know that the tile is blue turns on your ‘specialized’ ability to recognize (hence come to *know*) whether something is blue, or a tile. We are now in a position to see how that suggestion might be filled out. If my sketch of the commonsense psychology of perceptual recognition is on the right lines, your ability has a sufficiently rich ‘structure’ to distinguish it from a mere disposition, yet the ‘structure’ is *sui generis*, not reducible to general-purpose inferential capacities. A

14 Compare Millar’s claim that ‘we have no independent conceptual grip’ on the notion of ‘sensory experiences such that it looks to us as if an F is there’ (2010, p. 136) — independent, that is, from our understanding of what it is to see that an F is there. Millar also makes a further, stronger claim that, to my mind, is less plausible, that the human capacity for perceptual recognition is independent of the ability to ‘think of appearances as such.’ (p. 123) On Millar’s account, *reflective* perceptual recognition involves a combination of not-essentially-reflective recognitional capacities (which are operative in reflective and non-reflective perceivers alike) with capacities for reflective awareness. (See Millar 2011 for a detailed development of this view.) I think partly as a result of his adherence to this view of the nature of reflective perception, Millar would be inclined to deny that what I called standing knowledge of the distinctive appearance of a kind or individual or feature is part of what makes perceptual recognition intelligible. Without being able to argue this here, I have two concerns about this picture: (a) it is not clear to me that we can offer a fully adequate response to the ‘virtus dormitiva’ objection without giving a central role to standing knowledge of appearances, and (b) there may be independent grounds for scepticism about ‘additive’ conceptions of reflective perception. (See Boyle 2016 for relevant discussion.)

noteworthy feature of this ‘structure’ is that, contra Stroud and Williamson, sensory experience ‘prior to knowledge’ plays an essential epistemic role. It is because visual experience presents you with the tile that you are able visually to attend to the tile and thus intelligibly answer questions about it. On the other hand, the role of sensory experience is strictly limited: your experience helps to make your knowledge intelligible only in combination with your capacity for recognizing tiles and blue things, informed by your standing knowledge of their distinctive visual appearances. I want to suggest that this provides a way to adjudicate a fundamental disagreement between McDowell and Stroud, with McDowell affirming and Stroud denying that perceptual knowledge is ‘based on experience’. My diagnosis will be that each of the two positions is importantly right about the shortcomings of the other.

4. The epistemic role of perceptual experience

Consider McDowell’s objection to what he calls the Stroud-Davidson view. That view denies that perceptual experience has, as McDowell puts it, a ‘reason-giving capacity’; it denies, specifically, that perceptual experience gives us what I earlier called ‘knowledge-providing’ reasons (reasons for beliefs such that the beliefs can be seen to amount to knowledge because they are held for those reasons). McDowell’s objection is that the ‘Stroud-Davidson’ view cannot accommodate the distinction between ordinary perceptual judgements and a (legendary) chicken-sexer’s taking a particular hatchling to be female. To mark the distinction, he maintains, we need the notion of a ‘perceptual impression’, a perceptual state that does not implicate either belief or knowledge but provides a rational basis — ‘something like an invitation’ — for belief. The notion would enable us to say this: the chicken-sexers ‘cannot find in their perceptual experience impressions whose content is that a chick is male, or that it is female.’ (McDowell 2002, p. 279) As a consequence, they lack the sort of reasons that explain and warrant ordinary perceptual beliefs. On this analysis, the ‘Stroud-Davidson’ view is revisionary: it is incompatible with a distinction commonsense finds compelling and with the part ‘perceptual impressions’ play in ordinary explanatory practice.

Stroud is unmoved by this objection, and I suspect part of his diagnosis is that the objection rests on an assumption that is itself revisionary: it projects ideas that have their home in classical foundationalist epistemology into commonsense psychology. In slightly more detail: on Stroud's view, we need to distinguish sharply between the claim that perceptual knowledge is 'based on' experience and the claim that it involves experience. Stroud acknowledges that we have perceptual experiences such as the experience of 'seeing and knowing that there is a red tomato and a plate there'. What he denies is that when someone sees and knows that there is a tomato, there is a visual experience that serves as 'the ground or basis of his knowledge that there is a tomato.' The sort of experience we undoubtedly have is what he calls a 'thick experience'. It is 'thick' in the sense that it is 'too close' to what we know to be able to explain how we know it. (2013, pp. 3-4)¹⁵ Stroud's main objection to a 'thin' notion of perceptual experience — such as the notion of a 'perceptual impression' in McDowell's sense — is this. A perceptual 'impression' would provide a 'basis' for our knowledge in a sense akin to that in which the known premises of a valid argument may be said to be the 'basis' of our knowledge of the truth of its conclusion. In both cases, we can be seen to know something because we believe it for a good reason. There is a crucial difference, however. The reason-giving capacity of a perceptual 'impression' is not supposed to depend on the subject's knowing, or even believing, what the impression represents to be so. The problem with this account is that it extends the scope of reason-giving explanations beyond the conditions that make such explanations intelligible. 'It is not simply the content of a person's experience that gives the reason to believe something', Stroud argues, 'it is the person's experiencing, or being aware of, or accepting, or somehow "taking in" that content.' (Stroud 2002, p. 89) Without your accepting that content, it could not be your reason to believe anything, nor could you take it to be a reason. The putative 'belief- (and knowledge-) independence' of McDowell's 'perceptual impressions' defeats

15 Once again, there is a striking affinity between Stroud's and Williamson's views. Williamson suggests that 'I can see that p' 'reports an experience only in the anodyne sense in which "I met John Boorman" reports an experience'. One thing that makes the sense anodyne is that one does not 'describe what it is like to have the experience'. Another, I think, is that the experience does not serve as the ground or basis for one's knowledge. In the case of 'visual knowledge', the correct explanation of how one knows is: 'by sight'. (2009, p. 348)

their essential purpose, to enable us to understand perceptual experience's 'reason-giving capacity'.

I think a sensible verdict at this point is that the objections McDowell and Stroud are trading with each other are both quite powerful. Stroud might of course insist that the chicken-sexers lack the 'thick' experience of 'seeing and knowing' that a hatchling is female. But given that a thick experience is not thought to *explain* how we know what we 'see and know', the question remains why its absence should make perceptual knowledge unavailable or unintelligible in the ordinary way. On the other hand, it does seem hard to make sense of McDowell's conception of the 'reason-giving capacity' of perceptual experience, something that (for one thing) would be surprising if, as McDowell contends, the conception were so much commonsense.¹⁶ Might both objections be correct? I think the reason this possibility tends to be overlooked lies in an assumption McDowell and Stroud share. The assumption can be put in the form of a conditional:

if perceptual experience plays a distinctive explanatory role in ordinary explanations of how we know what we know through perception, commonsense conceives of perceptual experience as an epistemic basis for beliefs (in the light of which such beliefs can be seen to qualify as knowledge).

McDowell accepts the antecedent, and argues by modus ponens. Stroud rejects the consequent, and argues by modus tollens. Neither of them, however, offers any reason for accepting the conditional. Suppose we reject it. Then we can agree with McDowell that sensory experience plays an essential role in accounting for perceptual knowledge. Without experience of objects (as in blindsight) or recognition-enabling features (as in chicken-sexing) intelligible perceptual recognition is impossible. We can also agree with Stroud that when someone makes an observational judgement, 'no experience serves as his *ground* or *reason* for

¹⁶ For critical discussion of this aspect of McDowell's account, see Travis 2004, Ginsborg 2006, Roessler 2009, Giananti 2019.

claiming or judging as he does' — at least if by 'ground or reason' we mean what McDowell means by it, viz. a reason responsiveness to which would explain how he knows what he knows. In another sense, though, experience does provide a 'ground or reason'. By contributing to a vindicatory explanation of his knowledge, it provides a reason to accept the claim that what he has is indeed knowledge. In *that* sense, McDowell is right to insist that sensory experience has a 'reason-giving capacity'.

5. Perceptual warrant: the manifest vs the philosophical image

One question defenders of McDowell's account will press is how, if we abandon the idea of 'perceptual impressions' that provide us with reasons for belief, we are to explain the *rationality* of perceptual beliefs. Knowing entails believing, and, in rational subjects, believing for good reasons. How can EP respect this? This is one complaint that might be made under the general heading of 'perceptual warrant'. Another is this. There is a sort of methodological disjunctivism built into EP. It approaches the relation between perceiving and believing by narrowly focusing on 'good' cases, in which perception yields knowledge, not just belief. But perception also causes and warrants 'mere' beliefs, as when odd lighting condition mislead you about the colour of a white tile. How is it that it can be perfectly reasonable, in such circumstances, to believe that the tile is blue?

I don't want to minimize the importance or difficulty of these issues, but I think so long as our interest is merely in articulating ordinary explanatory practice they pose no very serious challenge. Put in general terms, the obvious response is that questions about our warrant for perceptual beliefs should be approached in the light of our independent understanding of the 'vindicatory role' of perception. What makes your belief that the tile is blue rational, when the blue tile is right in front of you in good daylight, is that you have a conclusive reason for it: you can see it's blue. As Stroud remarks, '(t)here is no better reason for believing and claiming to know that p than seeing or otherwise perceiving that p.' (2009, p. 566) True, the reason would not be available to you if you were not aware that you can see the tile to be blue. But arguably, it is no accident that if a rational subject visually recognizes an

object she will ordinarily be in a position to know that she recognizes the object.¹⁷ In turn, this account may help to understand the sense in which ‘mere’ perceptual beliefs can be reasonable. That you are unaware of the unusual lighting conditions explains (and excuses) your mistaken belief that you’re in a situation in which you can visually tell the tile’s colour. That the tile is looking bright blue to you explains (and excuses) your mistaken belief that you are able to tell it’s blue, and hence your belief that it is blue. (See Millar 2011)

Both suggestions (even if properly elaborated) will raise a number of detailed concerns. But I think the reason they are bound to strike many as unsatisfactory is not a matter of detail but of principle. They violate a maxim almost universally acknowledged in epistemology, that if you know that *p* through perception it must be possible to give an independent account of how your perception warrants your belief that *p*. Let’s call this the explanatory priority of perceptual warrant (PPW). There are different perspectives from which one may try to understand the popularity of PPW. From one point of view, it can seem as if there are simply a variety of quite heterogeneous traditions and concerns in epistemology that happen to converge on PPW. One of the sources of its appeal, for example, is surely the traditional view that knowledge can be reductively analyzed as warranted true belief. That view makes it utterly natural to assume that explaining how you know that *p* can only be a matter of explaining how your true belief comes to be warranted in the relevant sense. Another source may be a traditional, ‘narrow’ view of the nature of sensory experience. If, as the ‘slightest philosophy’ supposedly teaches us, ‘nothing can ever be present to the mind but an image or perception’ (Hume 1975, p. 152), sensory experience could not intelligibly put us in a position non-inferentially to tell what mind-independent objects are like. The only role it could conceivably play in making knowledge of objects possible would be that of contributing in some way to our justification for forming beliefs about objects.

17 See Millar 2011 for a version of this idea, which appeals to the notion of a ‘second-order perceptual-recognitional capacity.’ An alternative version, I think, is implicit in the discussion of the previous section: roughly, the idea would be that perceptual recognition, in the case of rational subjects, is inherently intelligible and so inherently self-conscious.

The various traditions that may be responsible for PPW's popularity would all deserve detailed attention. But here I want to focus on an alternative perspective that can fruitfully be adopted in thinking about PPW. There may be a way of motivating PPW that does not rely on contentious doctrines about the nature of propositional knowledge or perceptual experience. A commitment to the principle, it may be argued, is inseparable from the project of achieving a philosophical understanding of perceptual knowledge, at least if epistemology is to be the 'critical' discipline it has traditionally aspired to be. The route to PPW I have in mind would involve two steps. The first step would insist that epistemology is not exhausted by what might be called 'descriptive epistemology'. The latter, to adapt Strawson's explication of 'descriptive metaphysics' (1959, p. 9), aims to 'describe the actual structure of our thinking' about perceptual knowledge. Without diminishing the value of that exercise, it cannot, by itself, answer epistemology's question, which is: how does perception provide us with knowledge of (and justified beliefs about) mind-independent objects? This is not a question about the structure of our ordinary thinking about perceptual knowledge. It is, simply, a philosophical question about perceptual knowledge itself. The second step would add that not only is the question not *about* commonsense psychology, but it cannot satisfactorily be answered simply by rehearsing commonsense psychology. We may ordinarily take it that seeing the tile will enable a (suitably equipped) perceiver to tell that it's a blue tile. But epistemology should stand back and ask whether we are right about this. That enterprise would be greatly facilitated if we had a definition or reductive analysis of knowledge, ideally as a kind of belief that meets certain further conditions. We could then simply ask whether perception provides for the satisfaction of the necessary and sufficient conditions for knowledge.¹⁸ But even if we lack a definition of knowledge, it is natural to think that the way to probe perceptual explanations of

18 The attraction of simultaneously understanding the nature of knowledge and the way vindictory explanations of knowledge work may be responsible for the tendency for 'what the press corps calls mission creep' that John Hyman discerns in contemporary work on the nature of knowledge: 'We start out wanting to say what knowledge is; but we quickly find ourselves embroiled in the question of how it can be acquired. And before long we have to evacuate by helicopter, leaving chaos behind us.' (1999, p. 435)

how we know what objects are like is to compare them with what we have independent reason to regard as the prototype of a vindictory explanation of knowledge, in terms of conclusive reasons for belief. Whether perception can explain and vindicate our knowledge of the world around us, in the end, depends on whether it resembles the prototype in relevant ways. Internalists and externalists have different ideas about what counts as relevant similarity here, but they agree that what matters is that you come to believe something in a way that explains how you are warranted in believing it.

The suggestion, then, is that what I called a ‘generalist’ approach to perceptual knowledge (in section 2) is unavoidable if we are to take the philosophical question seriously. We need to be able to understand the epistemic role of perception in terms we have independent reason to think yield vindictory explanations. In contrast, as I emphasized, ordinary explanatory practice, as represented by EP, is incorrigibly ‘particularist’. It makes our knowledge of objects intelligible by reference to specialized perceptual-epistemic skills rather than general-purpose capacities, such as responsiveness to evidence or reliable belief-forming dispositions. The exercise of the specialized skill is seen as sufficient for knowledge, despite being, as Williamson puts it, highly unnecessary. (2009, p. 359)

I think the two-step route to PPW captures something of the spirit in which work on perceptual warrant is commonly conducted. I will leave open whether a case for PPW along these lines is convincing, and whether it is free of contentious assumptions about the nature of perception or propositional knowledge.¹⁹ But I want to conclude by indicating grounds for scepticism, not about the philosophical project itself but about its chances of corroborating our everyday thinking about

19 If so, this would be one way in which the two-step route to PPW differs from Stroud’s suggestive discussion of the sources of what he describes as the philosophical project of giving a ‘completely general’ explanation of our knowledge of the world around us, despite similarities in other respects. (Stroud 2000, esp. essays 8 and 10) At least some of his formulations suggest that according to Stroud, a central commitment of the philosophical project is a certain view of sense perception, one on which ‘we could perceive exactly what we perceive now even if there were no material world at all’ (2000, p. 102)

perceptual knowledge. Philosophers differ in the degree to which they are interested in the latter. Sometimes commonsense merely figures in the guise of ‘intuitions’ used to prompt epistemological theorizing. But many theorists of perceptual warrant think of their work as something that will deepen and validate our ordinary practice of explaining knowledge by reference to perception. The problem is that if EP is correct, there seems to be a sufficiently profound dissonance between the perspective of commonsense and the perspective of the philosophical project to scupper the prospect of any such validation. There seems to be a ‘gap or dislocation’ here, akin to the one Bernard Williams identifies in the enterprise of justifying ordinary ethical thinking on the basis of utilitarian theory: a ‘gap or dislocation between the spirit of the theory itself and the spirit it supposedly justifies.’ (Williams 1985, p. 108) The spirit of commonsense psychology says that the best (though of course not the only) way to convince others that one knows that a certain tile is blue would be to invite them to look at the tile, something that will enable them to recognize both the tile’s colour and the justice of one’s claim to knowledge. The spirit of epistemology says that there cannot be any really good reason to think that one’s attitude is knowledge without an independent account of how one’s visual experience helps to warrant one’s belief. On the face of it, there is a straightforward conflict here over the reasons we have for crediting ourselves and others with knowledge. In view of this ‘dislocation’, it is perhaps unsurprising that epistemologists have sought to domesticate commonsense, by analyzing everyday explanatory practice in terms of some sort of belief-centred schema, internalist or externalist. But the desire to avert the threat of ‘dislocation’ would not be a good reason for accepting any such analysis. There is an obvious risk here of surreptitiously retrojecting a revisionary philosophical theory into commonsense psychology.²⁰

20 I borrow the term from Janet Broughton’s suggestion that Descartes ‘retrojects’ some of the metaphysical and epistemological results reached in Meditation VI into the putatively commonsensical view the meditator finds himself holding at the beginning of Meditation I. (Broughton 2003, p. 31) See also Stroud’s discussion of the risk of ‘metaphysical conviction’ leading to ‘distortion or misunderstanding’ of our everyday ways of thinking. (Stroud 2011b, p. 15) A nice example of the retrojection of a revisionary philosophical theory into commonsense is provided by William Kneale’s gloss on Locke’s theory of secondary qualities: ‘When

To say that pursuit of the philosophical question cannot succeed in validating our everyday thinking is not, of course, to say that it cannot succeed at all. It might succeed, for example, in *debunking* our everyday thinking. Colour provides an analogy here. On one analysis, we ordinarily take it that the colours of objects, which we conceive neither as dispositions nor as microphysical properties, explain the experience we enjoy when we perceive colours. The manifest image, thus described, might then be said to have been superseded by vision science. It may be said, similarly, that the commonsensical notion that we find out what objects are like by deploying capacities for perceptual recognition has been debunked by epistemology, which reveals that the explanation and vindication of our knowledge in fact turns on whether and how perception warrants our beliefs. This would obviously be to place a lot of confidence in PPW. One important question would be whether the case for PPW is strong enough to warrant that confidence. But a successful debunking manoeuvre would also depend on another condition. It would require that jettisoning the commonsense psychology of perceptual knowledge would not take with it too much — nothing, at least, that's indispensable for human thought and knowledge. That condition would also deserve careful scrutiny. As in other areas²¹, breaking away from the manifest image may turn out to be no straightforward matter.²²

Locke said that the secondary qualities were powers in things to produce sensations in us, he stated the facts correctly, but he did not realize that his statement was only an analysis of the plain man's use of secondary quality adjectives.' (Kneale 1950, p. 123) I owe this quote to Keith Allen's illuminating discussion of what he calls the 'Oxford view of colour', in Allen 2007.

21 Compare Stroud's discussion of modal, causal and evaluative thinking in his 2011b.

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